

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL ROBERT HOLMES,  
U.S. AIR FORCE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND VIA  
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): General  
Holmes, thank you very much for joining us here for the Bloggers Roundtable this  
morning. Appreciate you being with us. And the floor is yours, sir.

GEN. HOLMES: Well, thanks. I appreciate being able to get back with  
you. I think -- as I recall, the last one of these that we did was about six  
weeks ago. And I had been moving about, actually got a little time off with  
some leave. And I told the folks here I'd really be interested in getting back  
with you, because I like to keep an open dialogue going and I feel like this is  
one way of doing it.

Briefly, what I want to do is just cover some things -- not necessarily  
in any order of priority that -- (inaudible) -- to look at in operations, but to  
just let you know what's on my plate and the things that I'm thinking about.  
And then you may find some interest in some of those things.

First, as you know at Central Command, being a regional combatant  
command headquarters, I like to think in terms of a regional perspective. And  
as we look at threats across the region, we've got to deal with those in a very  
comprehensive manner. And the last time that we were together, I told you that  
we were very close to establishing an interagency task force for irregular  
warfare, meaning that we would be able, as the combatant command, to work with  
interagency partners across the various lines of government -- and also to  
include non-governmental agencies -- in looking at challenges in the region and  
then finding very comprehensive or holistic ways of meeting those challenges, so  
that we would better use the principle of DIMES: diplomacy, information,  
military and societal/cultural and economic solutions.

So that what we're viewing is for the future, for the long haul, this --  
- what some people call the asymmetric war environment; other people are calling  
it irregular warfare. Some folks are calling it a whole-of-government approach  
to warfare. It doesn't matter what you call it, it's a holistic approach to  
solving, for the long haul, strategic regional problems.

And that interagency task force -- we're very encouraged. The task  
force is coming together. We are initiating our operations now, and we're  
seeing progress in the way we're coming about and partnering not only with the

interagency but our other combatant commands as they go down this road as well. And I can talk more about that if you're interested.

Regionally, we look at influences of extreme actors that are malign, that would provide from within their borders, exporting either violence or activities that would be disruptive to their neighbors.

And clearly, you know, in my mind, Iran fits that bill. And now this is not to say that as a military person that I'm stepping out of my lane into a political lane, to say that it's state-sponsored. But I will not do that.

What I will say is, is that in the battlespace, if you see malign actors, and it's clearly marked with Iranian influence in terms of tactics, techniques, procedures, equipment, training manuals and such as that; if you find bad stuff in the wrong places, then you've got to call it like you see it. And we clearly continue to see that and continue to watch that.

So our business is looking at this malign influence and then figuring out what we can do to counter it here again in a holistic manner, not necessarily just force on force. Because I think we all know that in order to counter, in order to combat and ultimately defeat these kinds of networked activities, it's more than just military force-on-force that will defeat these things for the long term, which in a way feeds me back to the first point, of the importance of our interagency task force for irregular warfare.

Taking a very serious look at civilian casualties, over the last year, we've seen an adversarial information operation or communications tactic with regard to civilian casualties.

We saw it at the use of the Taliban in Afghanistan. And now I've seen, in my mind, this began to emerge in Iraq, as we see a challenge of a very insular discrepancy in what we see in open-source reporting, with regard to civilian casualties, and then what is actually in our operational reporting.

So that here again is a challenge. We're tracking that because we believe that -- I believe that the enemy uses this tactic to try to dissuade a civilian populace from the things that are actually going on there.

And then looking at the use of female suicide bombers, I'm not saying that this is a significant trend at this point, because the numbers are few. But it is a departure in enemy tactic-technique procedures. We see young teens, particularly young females, and we see the use of mentally disabled persons as suicide bombers.

It's too early to say that this may be a sign of desperation. And I'm not necessarily saying it's widespread. But the question that it begs me to ask is, we've watched the recruitment and flow of young males that have been recruited to be suicide bombers.

We've been trying to target that network to disrupt that flow. So now in Iraq as we see the use of -- the reported use of teens, young teen females, females that are from some hospitals, that are there for mental disablement, if this is now an act of desperation or not, that's what we're trying to weigh out. Again, not saying that it's widespread, not saying that in terms of statistics that this would represent a significant trend -- (short audio break) -- we've got to look at.

So let me stop there. Those are the four or five things that I would offer to you that sort of cross my desk on a daily basis that I'm taking a look at. There are other things that you may want to ask, and I'm ready to go with your questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And let me just clear one thing here. Somebody else joined us. Who's there?

Q Hi. This is Bryant Jordan, military.com.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Bryant, thanks.

Q Sorry to be late.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Chuck, go ahead.

Q Good evening, General. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal.

GEN. HOLMES: Okay.

Q I'd like to ask you about civilian casualties. Two questions.

First, your remarks on that topic seem to suggest that you have intelligence or information that there is an organized effort to distort the reporting of civilian casualties by providing inaccurate or false information to the media. Is that the case?

GEN. HOLMES: Well, in some cases it may be. What we do know in terms of intelligence is that both the networks of al Qaeda and the networks of the Taliban have media specialists. In some cases, they are called media emirs or they're called media facilitators. And these folks know -- I mean, they are savvy to manipulating media. We know that. And we also know that they're connected to stringers, they're connected to Internet blog sites, and so for me, it's got to say, yes, there is a -- there's a malign actor there that, in my mind, would have the purpose in an information operation campaign -- and that's clearly a piece of terrain for our adversary -- that they're going to use this to their advantage.

The difference is -- well, one -- there are several differences.

One, we're bound to tell the truth. In some cases, our adversary is not. I would say in most cases they're not. We're bound to use what we think are legitimate media outlets as we do give truthful and honest assessments and information. The media outlets that our adversaries has used that we would see them network may not necessarily be as upright or as -- let me see if I can choose the right word -- as steadfast in the principles of journalistic truth.

However, once information is put into this dynamic information environment, often the perception is then created -- and you all well know this as journalists -- perceptions are created, it's out there now in a huge,

worldwide blogosphere or network of information, and often truth is no longer important; it's just out there.

So if I were my opponent and I wanted to do something against somebody who I knew was grounded in truthful principles and I did not have those scruples, then I would use that to my advantage.

Q All right, sir. And my second question would be, I personally have had difficulty in following up on some media stories that I've seen, and getting someone in theater to respond with some sort of either confirmation or denial of what AP or Reuters or the Kuwaiti News Agency -- what they're reporting. Do you have any plans for some sort of a centralized information response unit that would be able to be the go-to folks for --

GEN. HOLMES: Initially the answer is -- and I would share your frustration and concern -- the initial answer, without me getting into the business of the warfighters on the ground -- in Iraq MNF-I, or in Afghanistan CJTF-101 -- is that their public affairs offices are connected to their operators. And if you go -- and you should be able to get them. And if the operational information is there and it's not tied to, say, a very, very sensitive operation, you should be able to get, with some degree of definition, the information that would help you sort out the operational reporting and the media report.

Now, it takes us time to verify, to go back, often, and connect what we see in an open-source report and then connect it to an actual operational report. So what I'm really saying there is -- and this is not widespread, so I wouldn't want you to take off on this horse -- but in some cases we've actually seen a media report at a time and a place where we were conducting no operations.

So it takes us a little time to dig through all of our operational units, through each one of their various tactical operation centers and verify that we didn't do anything at that time and at that place that it was reported. And even when that happens, we will try to clarify that through the various public affairs offices.

Past that, are we going to centralize a way to do that? Again, I've got to be mindful that I sit at the regional combatant command headquarters and I've got to be careful how much I do to get into the daily business of the components. But what we are doing regionally is collecting what we see as the trend information so that I can share it in a form just like we are today.

Q Thank you, General.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Bryant.

Q Hi. Thank you very much. Bryant Jordan, military.com.

GEN. HOLMES: How are you doing? I haven't seen you in a while.

Q No. It's been a couple of years, back when I was at Air Force Times, I guess.

GEN. HOLMES: That's right.

Q And a couple things here. One is, you mentioned that the -- what you've seen in terms of equipment or tactics that appear to have come out of Iran that you're seeing there. And I wondered, as recently as, I guess, April, we in the media were told we'd be seeing some very strong evidence in terms of collection of weapons or whatever, mortars, that would be identified as from Iran, and that has never materialized. I was wondering whatever became of --

GEN. HOLMES: As I recall, that was about two months ago with MNF-I. What I see is, as the government of Iraq and the prime minister are stepping up, in my mind, from what I see -- and this is just a personal observation -- are stepping up to deal with this malign influence, and while I think at one point in time MNF-I was prepared to present this, what I've seen is more sharing it with the government of Iraq and letting the government of Iraq determine how it's going to deal with its neighbor -- which I think is a very healthy approach, by the way, because we could come out as the U.S. and go out to our domestic audience and say, look, here's what we've seen, here's what we've got, and I'm only going to convince you that -- or not -- that maybe there's a problem.

For the regional issue, we think it's more important to let the government of Iraq stand up, that they take this information, they do something with it, which they are doing, and they confront whom they choose as a malign actor or someone who is trying to disrupt or combat their desire to be a sovereign state.

Q Right.

GEN. HOLMES: So what I think we see is not a withholding of that information; it was it's more important to share it at a different place and let the right persons -- and in this case, the sovereign government of Iraq and its leadership -- determine how they want to deal with malign, violent, external actors in their nation.

And what I see is -- just in the things of -- the recent activities of Maliki, some statements that he's made, his willingness to take charge of the situation and execute operations, I view that as a very, very good thing, a healthy step for the government of Iraq.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

GEN. HOLMES: I think I've convoluted the answer, but I hope you see where I was trying to go with it.

Q I believe I -- I believe I do. Do I have time for one more question?

MR. HOLT: Yes, go ahead.

Q Okay, sure. You had mentioned also about the ability of the enemy to use media to their advantage. You mentioned that they have stringers out there and connections to web sites. I was wondering, in view of that, you know, would you care to comment on the Pentagon's orchestrated use of retirees -- and everywhere from MSNBC to Fox and elsewhere -- to get out their message?

GEN. HOLMES: You know, I read that -- I read the article several weeks ago. I, in some ways, was trying to dig through that. I would just have to let

OSD handle that one and call it like they see it, which I think they've pretty much done. So --

MR. HOLT: All right. Okay, has anybody joined us? Anybody else got on there?

Okay, any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, Jack.

General, you talked about the influence of outside parties in Iraq, and you've named Iran in particular. Can you speak to either the increase/decrease/the same effect for some of the other regional powers? I'm thinking specifically Syria, which at one point was practically a freeway into Iraq for a great many bad folks. What have you seen with regard to Syria, with regard to the Saudis versus the way things used to be?

GEN. HOLMES: I'll tell you what I see -- and this is not necessarily from a purely military perspective, but as I just view what's going on in the open source right now of Syria dialoguing, of Saudi taking certain actions. I have always thought that regional actors, once given time and space to articulate and do things, they would do it.

For me to understand all of the motives or agendas, I'm not sure that I'm politically savvy enough to understand them all. But I do -- I am watching Syria as it's now beginning to open regional dialogue.

I think we would continue to watch that. And then I think that we see in the same way Saudi beginning to use its position as a conduit for dialogue.

I'm very much encouraged by the recent talks in Doha with regard to Lebanon. I think there it's great to see a regional partner be engaged, be a moderating voice for the region. So I mean, that, in a way, is huge. And here again, this is not from a military perspective, but as I watch the political arena, that's huge.

And then going down the -- you know, what I opened up with, the strategic value of other than just leaning on the military instrument of power and the DIMES model -- as we see the other instruments of power working, then that's really what Central Command has been saying, at least for the two years that I've been here. You know, beginning with -- my two years covers the latter part of the Abizaid times, the Fallon times and now the Dempsey times. And all three of those commanders have said it's going to take other than a military solution.

So as we see regional actors pursuing diplomacy, pursuing diplomatic or political dialogue, pursuing assisting in a societal/cultural way in moderating the region, I think that's very good.

Now, we all have our own perceptions of these actors. And I think it's a time that we go, "Okay, regardless of what we've perceived, regardless of what we think agendas are, let's wait and see now what you're saying and what you're doing." And I think that's very important.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Anything else?

Q I think I'm all set. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. well, sir, I do have -- I have a question. I'd like to kind of know more about the task force and the progress you're making as -- who -- what other agencies make up the task force? Is there any of them that we might not have thought of? For example, I would expect the Department of State and --

GEN. HOLMES: (Sure ?). MR. HOLT: -- oh, the -- and the Department of Commerce, possibly. Are there any others in that task force that we may not have considered that may be -- and that may have --

GEN. HOLMES: (Inaudible) -- and that's a great question. Department of Justice. Department of Homeland Defense is represented. The Department of Treasury. And in those areas with Justice, it's huge, the things that we can do in our region with our FBI partners, and then that links us to Interpol as we look to seek the criminalization of certain bad actors that are not necessarily enemy combatants, but they're bad actors. So we don't pursue them with a military line of operation, but we can pursue them with a Justice line of operation, and working hand in hand with the governments in the region.

That is a very, very huge activity for us.

Department of Treasury is a great ally when it comes to helping us tracking the bad guys' money. If you track the money, you can begin to build a very good common operating picture of an adversary's network because they need dollars to work. And so the Department of Treasury with its Threat Finance Branch helps us there, and then the Treasury folks that assist us with designating rewards for certain high-valued individuals that we're trying to conduct operations or to capture or detain. So Department of Treasury is in there.

Outside of that, you know, we're seeking to expand that network into working with, you know, our partners at Special Operations Command, at Strategic Command, at the National Terrorist -- NCTC, the National Combatting Terrorism Center in Washington, so that we build an enterprise network for the nation so that we approach -- a holistic approach, or we can provide a holistic approach for the future.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir. And as a follow-up on that, the Army, and the National Guard, in particular, has set up basically a county extension-type operation, department of Agriculture County extension- type operation for Afghanistan. Has that been kind of -- of consideration?

GEN. HOLMES: Absolutely. The agricultural engagement teams?

MR. HOLT: Yes.

GEN. HOLMES: I'm sorry, the ADTs. They're Agricultural Development Teams. This is -- in a way, it's so simple, it's such low-hanging fruit, but it's so effective, because we all know in turning the tide in Afghanistan it's going to be creating a substantial profitable activity for the people of Afghanistan.

Part of that right now is in growing poppy. If we can work at just the local level, which these National Guard teams are able to do -- and oh, by the

way, these people come from the Farm Belt, so they know this. This is their tool that they live with -- is to work with the Afghan farmers in order to develop, you know, a robust agricultural economy and begin to turn away from the poppy product.

Does this happen overnight? No. But it's this kind of engagement that's sustained that we can use through our National Guard element with these Agricultural Development Teams. And that's huge in the long run. I mean, that is a huge strategic benefit there that pays off years down the road, but it's something that we can do today and is very low-hanging fruit.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. And what are the near-term objectives that the task force is looking at?

Anything in particular you can speak to there?

GEN. HOLMES: Yes. We're looking at countering some of the line networks -- and I can't go much past that -- but we're -- part of the task force is a very robust operational and intelligence fusion center, and it is directing a primary effort toward disrupting some specific elements of some terror networks.

We're also looking at the civilian casualty challenge that we face with our adversary's media reporting. And then there are a few other things that we're -- we're teeing up. Remember, this is a crawl/walk/run activity right now, and we're beyond crawling, we're standing up. Like I said, you know, the success of pulling this together and being able to actually put some concepts of operation on the table here recently are huge signs of success for us. But we're teeing a few other things up in addition to those two.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Well, we look forward to hearing about what you can talk to us about --

GEN. HOLMES: I'll be glad to tell you as soon as I can.

MR. HOLT: (Laughs.) All right, sir.

GEN. HOLMES: (Laughs.)

Q General?

MR. HOLT: Yes, go ahead.

Q (Inaudible.) There was a -- in what you said -- spoken about today, you mentioned number of -- you had a couple of phrases, some I've heard before from -- you know.

But this force ends up giving birth to a whole new kind of the enemy being. You've got bad actors, special groups, maligned networks and illegal combatants. Is there a glossary at hand to tell us who these --

GEN. HOLMES: I wish there were. That's -- part of the problem with an irregular fight is there's an irregular lexicon. I think, probably, if I could capture it all, it's -- the one we've on, I think, is violent extreme actors or violent extreme organizations. When you're trying to get your hands around it on a daily basis, you begin to, in your own mind, view these violent extreme



actors in many different ways. So I'll try to do better, and, in fact, maybe I should do Bad Bob's Lexicon for Fighting Irregular Terrorist Actors.

Q Very good.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.) I think that would be helpful.

Q Jack, do we have time for one more follow-up?

MR. HOLT: Just -- yeah, okay. Chuck, go right ahead.

Q Yeah. General, in your comments, what I thought I heard was that one of the things that you're working is taking certain behaviors and certain people that engage in these behaviors out of the military realm and into the criminal justice realm; in other words, not all violence is political, not all violence is terrorism, not all robberies are political. Did I hear that correctly, that what you're trying to is, in essence, criminalize?

GEN. HOLMES: Absolutely, because you've got to remember, from a military point of view, you as a nation give me authorities to do certain things. And with those authorities, then, I'm bound by law to do just those things. And for me, as Department of Defense, it falls into a military lane of being able to capture, through a direct action mission, or to otherwise destroy an activity or kill a certain combatant. And that's very, very -- you know, very clear.

However, if there's a maligned actor in the battlespace that, in an irregular environment, not everybody's wearing a uniform, not everybody is carrying an ID card that says, "I'm a uniformed military combatant." But they're still in our battlespace, and they're -- they are, in fact, supporting, or in some cases, killing and disrupting -- the killing innocent civilians, killing coalition forces and disrupting our efforts.

So we've got to have a way to deal with those folks and get them out of the battlespace. So if they're not considered an enemy combatant, then I've still got to have them out of the battlespace. We as a nation need them out of the battlespace.

There are certain things that the Justice Department can do, coupled with international policing through Interpol, that we can criminalize and get that bad actor out of the battlespace. So from my point of view, I really don't care how we get them out of there. If I've got the authorities to do it, and they're in a -- they're in a time and place where I can use my authorities to do it as the military, then I'll do that.

If, in fact, they are elsewhere but they're still creating a bad effect in my battlespace, and I've got a partner through an interagency, either nationally or internationally, that can assist me by removing that person from the battlespace, then I want to leverage that particular talent or capability to do that.

Bottom line, the effect achieved is the bad actor is no longer present to do bad things.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

I want to thank you very much for joining us here today, General Holmes. And hopefully, perhaps we can speak again in a few weeks.

GEN. HOLMES: Yeah. If I can -- if I can encourage Cheryl Law (sp) here to -- to get it scheduled, we'll do it pretty soon.

MR. HOLT: All right. Great, sir.

GEN. HOLMES: Thanks a lot.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much for joining us.

Q Thank you very, very much.

GEN. HOLMES: Yep.

END.